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By- Rozzell, Forrest

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Interest groups in contemporary American society achieve their goals in proportion to the amount of power they are able to exert. Therefore, school administrators should exercise their authority and political power as effective lobbyists to influence legislative decisions on both state and federal levels for the achievement of educational objectives. The school administrator needs to recognize this aspect of his total responsibility, providing legislators with facts and arguments upon which sound legislative decisions can be made and marshalling the widest possible public support for what he has presented. (JK)

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The Politics of Education: To Lobby or Not to Lobby

AASA, February 21, 1968
-- Forrest Rozzell

As much as possible I shall stick to the assigned subject. As I interpret it, we are not here to discuss the broad, inclusive aspects of politics of education. Rather, our concern is with the alleged alternatives: To lobby or not to lobby. I used "alleged" deliberately because this qualifying phrase indicates not only an area of discussion but also, in my opinion, an unrealistic attitude. Apparently the extraordinary myth that education is somehow not the politicians' business and that politics is not for educators continues. Undoubtedly the prevalence of this myth justifies its discussion.

It is my thesis that there is no alternative to the compelling responsibility of school administrators to lobby.

As we all know, "to lobby" means to attempt to influence a legislator or legislators in favor of one's own point of view.

Lobbying insofar as it helps to place first-hand facts and reliable arguments before members of legislative bodies may be of great assistance and is indispensable. However, to the extent that biased information is given which may unduly influence legislators who do not verify its claims, such lobbying is decidedly pernicious. There are, of course, sinister ways of lobbying; however, the kind of lobbying I am advocating is open, forthright and persistent. In the final analysis the only hope which the educational lobby has for securing acceptance of its point of view lies in the reaction of the public to the merits of its case.

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Because legislative bodies do not operate either in a vacuum or a sterile environment, every major legislative decision involves choices between or among alternatives. Inevitably this creates a conflict situation. As a consequence, too many school administrators, under the guise of any number of pretexts, withdraw from the arena and supinely hope that the cause of public education will not suffer too much.

Research has shown that certain individuals in every social system can and do influence decisions or actions of others. Any school administrator worth his salt is one of the "power actors" in the community. As such he should understand the operation and dynamics of social power. Social power is usually defined as the capacity to control the actions of others. The superintendent is in a position to exercise two recognized means of control: Authority and influence. Authority is the power given to the individual by the system. As the administrative head of his school system the administrator occupies a position of authority. This adds to the prestige and credibility of his point of view. Influence is the amount of power an individual has by virtue of control of or access to resources relevant to the proposed social action -- legislative action. The capacity of the superintendent to influence legislative action to a greater extent than that which springs from his authority is determined by his personality, his attitudes and his abilities. His influence is due to such factors as reputation, skill in handling people, special knowledge not only of the school system but also of the social system, dependability, willingness to become involved and courage.

By the judicious use of both his authority and influence the superintendent can be an effective lobbyist -- can significantly influence legislative decisions.

It is axiomatic that every human society develops, extends and perpetuates itself through organized and unorganized processes of education and learning. As a consequence, education impinges upon every facet of society and every facet of society impinges upon education. As society becomes more complex, greater demands are made of education, its organized system of education becomes more complex, and the interaction between education and other aspects of society not only expands and accelerates but also becomes more profound.

Today irresistible forces, over which educational leaders have no control, are producing changes -- social, moral, economic, and political -- at a pace which defies human comprehension, let alone institutional adaptations. In the absence of instant, ready-made pragmatic answers as to how to cope with these forces and their logical implications, "education" is being espoused as the answer. As a consequence, "education" is rapidly becoming the dominant domestic political issue in America, and it will continue to be so for the foreseeable future. This trend, with its changing expectations, is attaching to "education" a new sense of urgency, and new bases for evaluation, judgment, and action are in the process of being established at all levels of social action. It is our political system which provides the vehicle for this social action.

The New Deal system has governed this country since 1932. Under this system interest group accommodation has replaced party conflict as the medium of political decision-making. It provides a theoretical basis for giving to each according to his claim, the price for which is a reduction of concern for what others are claiming.

Every organized interest is allowed, in effect, to write its own ticket. Potentially dissident groups are bought off by giving them access to levers of governmental power. The price is merely a pledge not to abridge the rights of others to collect their share of the subsidies.

As party competition has waned, interest group activity has waxed: Rather than press their claims in the test arena of party politics, groups work through a pressure system that guarantees success to the well-organized.

By and large, the system has worked. As long as there are sufficient resources to subsidize the major claimants and as long as there is a basic ideological consensus endorsing the distributive system, a viable alternative to partisan conflict is provided. If each of the major groups in society is free to write its own ticket, why should any of them be concerned with what the others get? In an affluent society it might, indeed, be possible to provide satisfactory subsidies to all major claimants; however, the financial strain of the war in Vietnam not only precludes this possibility but also is forcing a redistribution of available resources. This does not eliminate the necessity to lobby. On the contrary, it increases the necessity.

Never has there been as great a need for school administrators to lobby as that which exists today.

In response to a blind faith that "education" is the solution to all the problems besetting mankind, government at every level and almost every group on the American scene is not only advocating but instituting "educational" programs with far too little regard for either the probability of success in achieving the alleged goals, or the proper relationship to existing programs, or their long-term effects. Too often these new "educational" programs are designed and administered to secure results which are to be used for immediate political purposes.

Already caught up in the mad fight for power under the money standard, far too many American citizens are oblivious to the future. They refuse to recognize the tremendous pressures which are being exerted to make the schools an integral part of the system by which the dominant social and economic institutions of our society staff themselves and propagate their values.

American political and social life is dominated by the commercial community and commercial values. The purposes of public education in America are in serious danger of being reduced to the single purpose of being a useful tool in furthering a perpetually expanding economy -- the production and consumption of more and still more consumer goods. Almost irresistible pressures are being asserted to make the American credo that man is motivated by self-interest as measured by his accumulation of wealth the central purpose of American education. While responsible educators must and will always be concerned with economic efficiency, they will have more concern for the objectives of self-realization, human relationships and civic responsibility, and their logical and detailed implications.

The "liberal" government programs which have been initiated in this century in America have dealt, directly and indirectly, almost exclusively with material phenomena, principally money and income. Little attention has been given to programs which might affect the quality of life for our people, although some programs have done so as a side effect.

In spite of the fact that the federal government has no consistent policy of supporting education -- no body of general educational policy -- it has repeatedly taken action through Congress on educational matters. Such congressional actions are the results of the interest group accommodation medium of political decision-making. Moreover, the substance of the programs thus enacted indicates the weakness of the education lobby.

There was a time when school administrators could sit back, do nothing and justify their apathy and indifference with the assumption that nothing of significance in the area of education would be done at the national level. But this is no longer true -- something is being done in every session of Congress. Members of the education profession should completely and relentlessly involve themselves, individually and through their professional organizations, in all decisions and actions by all members of Congress which are involved in a determination of federal educational policy in a systematic and sustained effort to see that such policy decisions are consistent with the expanding responsibilities of public education.

Whether we like it or not, federal power will continue to grow, simply because our nation has grown into such a large, complex society. It will exert a growing influence on educational decisions.

State legislators and members of Congress are more directly responsible for the future of American education than any other group, including educators. What they do controls significantly what the educators can do. They control the purse strings of the principal sources of financial support. They frame the limits of local school board actions. They can facilitate or stymie educational change. They can initiate new educational programs and alter or abolish existing programs. They establish priorities in the use of public resources. All permanent progress in the field of education depends fundamentally on their decisions.

Because of the increasing public concern with public education, politicians today are thoughtfully and resolutely addressing themselves to educational problems. Legislators at both state and national levels are exerting a stronger leadership role and asserting their responsibility in providing and financing more adequate educational programs. In exercising this role and responsibility they should have access to the best possible information upon which to make their decisions in education.

One of the inescapable responsibilities of the school administrator is to provide legislators with first-hand facts and reliable arguments upon which sound legislative decisions can be made. It is also the responsibility of the administrator to marshal the widest possible public support for the facts and arguments he has presented.

The academic community can no more afford the role solely of critic than it can the role of indifference or apathy. If political leaders are not provided imaginative and constructive ideas by the professionally competent, they will look to other, less competent sources.

It is ironic that school administrators are still discussing the advisability of utilizing a political decision-making system which has been in operation for over 35 years, and, at a time when the system apparently is being significantly altered by the pressure of circumstances. The prevailing political opinion is that it is not possible to have guns and butter; therefore, redistribution of governmental resources is inevitable. Redistribution will inevitably provoke new coalitions of interest groups. More persistent, more comprehensive and more highly organized lobbying by school administrators is the order of the day. Our task is to weld a new coalition of power and influence to see that sound decisions result in sound action to improve education in every locality in every state in this nation.

In an article in the American School Board Journal for January of this year, Dr. John H. Harrington lists 18 political guidelines for administrators. These guidelines are relevant to our discussions. They are:

"1. Remember that a person elected to the Legislature or Congress must have a special kind of ego to survive the process. Take this fact into consideration when expressing your views to him.

"2. To be effective, keep in mind that messages to legislators should emphasize effects on boys and girls, not on you as a board member, administrator, supervisor, or teacher.

"3. When reacting to a legislator's proposal, do not begin by simply saying that it is bad. Point out objectively the effects that the measure will have and its limitations in terms of the educational program.

"4. Before you ask a legislator to support or oppose a particular measure, prove to him that your judgment is competent in some other area. This, of course, requires that you become acquainted well in advance of the time that you wish to communicate with him.

"5. Remember that the effectiveness of a letter will depend upon the way it is written and on the issue involved. The communication will receive far more consideration if the legislator knows the writer. 'Do not waste postage on letters to legislators unless you live in his district,' legislators have said repeatedly.

"6. Do not overlook the fact that, as with all else in education, speaking up politically requires hard work. Background reading, study, contributions during campaigns, and acceptance of invitations to help, all are important.

"7. Although it is difficult, if not impossible, for educators always to speak with a united voice, remember that legislators expect them to do so. One of the most frequent criticisms of school personnel is that 'they do not know what they want'. Legislators receive conflicting demands from board members, administrators, supervisors, and teachers.

"8. If you are working with or representing a professional association, keep in mind that it is particularly vital to combine your efforts, whenever possible, with those of other education groups.

"9. Recognize that your influence upon a legislator is often in direct proportion to your leadership in the community. Naturally, the legislator assesses you in relation to your service as a citizen.

"10. Recognize that the educator's legislative liaison cycle is endless, from campaigns and elections to legislative sessions and preparation for the next campaign or session.

"11. Be thoroughly acquainted with the steps of the legislative process such as the stages through which a bill is developed and introduced, how it can be amended, and what can happen when the measure reaches the governor's desk.

"12. Because of the many last-minute changes which a bill can undergo, when possible support positions and principles rather than specific legislation. If the legislator knows how you stand on a particular issue he can understand what your viewpoint will be when a bill is amended at the last minute and can act accordingly.

"13. Prior to a legislative session analyze the political climate and the major issues which are likely to be presented. Effective homework will strengthen your judgment when decisions are necessary later. A political adviser recommended to education leaders these steps:

"a. Develop a political objective which is realistic, whether it is a legislative proposal, tax over-ride measure, or program for school construction.

"b. Analyze the 'political context'. How many registered voters are there in your district? Where do they live? What ethnic groups do they represent? How well do they come to the polls? Who are their leaders?

"c. Prepare a plan, or pick a strategy. Remember that the plan must be simple.

"d. Decide on the tactics of communication.

"e. Evaluate the results of the election with political leaders, win or lose. Determine what the reasons were for the outcome.

"14. Be psychologically prepared to lose sometimes without sacrificing your position, lines of communication, and organization.

"15. Present your point of view to legislators in language which they will understand.

"16. Be flexible. Understand that political action and outcomes are built on compromises.

"17. Be honest. Later on you will have to live with the promises and predictions you have made.

"18. Learn how to command attention and respect but recognize that, in the process, it may be necessary to 'forego love'. 'Sometimes it is necessary to be an adversary', explained a legislative advocate for a professional organization."

The future of public education in America rests upon the willingness of school administrators to assume their responsibility to lobby.